ON HOLY GROUND
Exodus 3:1-6
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Several summers ago I had been invited to preach at a resort in Michigan. The Sunday evening vesper service took place in an outdoor amphitheater facing the lake. After the service several people remained behind chatting and as the sun began to set, we sat down again, looking out at the water. Several others who had not been there for worship joined us. The conversation was light and the experience was very pleasant. As the sun continued to sink, casting brilliant, sparkling light across the water, however, our group began to talk less until, for the last minute of the gorgeous sunset, we were sitting in silence. It was good to be there together, as it is always good to be able to share extraordinary beauty with other people, but no one needed to say a word. After that final brightness disappeared from sight and we sat for a few more moments in the silence, someone began to applaud. We all joined. It seemed a very logical thing to do. They told me afterward that it often happens like that: that silently watching and applauding the sunset was a local custom.

I have not forgotten that experience. In fact, I have thought about it a lot. I have noted that a group of people sensed something extraordinary, appreciated it, enjoyed it, had been a little overwhelmed by it, and had understood that the experience was authentically corporate - it would not have been the same had it been a solitary experience. I noted that the experience touched something deep in each, and called something out - something like gratitude, love, adoration, expressed in the applause. I concluded that, in a very unique way, I had worshipped God. I concluded that the experience was related to that prototype worship sequence from antiquity, Moses and the burning bush.

It is a fundamental kind of story. Before he was liberator and law giver, Moses was a refugee, and a husband, and a shepherd. One day, near Mt. Horeb, Moses saw an incredible sight, a bush burning but not consumed by the fire. As he approached this extraordinary phenomenon he heard a voice: "...do not come near - don't get too close - take your shoes off, in fact, because you are standing on Holy Ground." Notice again, an experience of mystery, otherness: notice human feelings of reverence: notice also the response, the removal of shoes, an act of adoration and homage.

French philosopher Gabriel Marcel argues that the ability to experience mystery in life and to respond to it in wonder and awe is an integral part of our humanity. In fact, Marcel argues that it is a corruption of human intelligence to try to live without this capacity. It is, I think, one of our finer attributes. We are never more thoroughly human than when we know that we are not divine. We are never more creative than when we open ourselves to that which lies outside ourselves.

The trouble is that the culture in which you and I live tries to be radically secular. The "God is Dead" school of theology has faded, but the fact is that the culture appears to have concluded that there is nothing to reality beyond that which we can touch, see, and feel. Roman Catholic theologian, Frederick Panella, described the secularism of modern America in these terms: "Thile people must live and cope with.....suffering, love, death, they do so from an almost exclusively pragmatic and utilitarian perspective." (Christian Century, October 7, 1981)

Peter Berger described a real secularist as one who sees the world as a "self-contained bubble of indeterminable human choices...a world without windows." And Protestant theologian Langdon Gilkey talks about a Godlessness which has nothing to do with praying or not praying in public schools, but everything in the world to do with the valuelessness and radical meaninglessness of modern urban life.

We live in a world that acts as if there is no God, the observers are saying. Oh, we go on talking about God, invoking his name in speeches, but his existence has no impact, no influence. That's what secularism is. Mystery can be, will be, explained. Revelation is an over-active imagination. The baby's smile, we all know,is caused by a gas pain, not angels.

Interestingly, we Protestants have not helped much in the preservation of the holy, the mysterious. For perfectly good reasons our Reformation inserted some rationality and intelligibility into the practice of worship. We translated the Bible into the venacular and at the threat of death, printed, published and read it out loud. We invented the idea that understanding has a part to play in the religious experience, and that carefully guarded mysteries, too far removed from the common sense objectivity of common men and women can become a ruse, a charade, or worse.

So we turned the altar around, called it a communion table, got the people involved in the act, turned on the lights, and sang hymns together. But in the process we gave birth to an extremist version of our genius which concluded that all mystery is to be avoided. The more belligerent Protestants turned sanctuaries into auditoriums, chancels into platforms, sacraments into rites, hymns into choruses, and vestments into business suits. If there is mystery in radical Protestantism, it has to sneak in through the back door.

The irony is that the world is not nearly as serious about its secularism as we assumed. Culture is having second thoughts about its celebrated atheism. It seems that people will hold on to some sense of the transcendent. And when the churches don't provide it they will look for it in bizarre motion pictures, or ever more bizarre, quasi-religious cults. Science, of all the disciplines, is leading the way to a renewed sense of the holy. Anthropologist Loren Eisely observed that "Ever since man first painted animals in the dark of caves he has been responding to the holy, to the numinous, to the mystery of being and becoming..." (ibid., p. 189)

The sense of the holy can be diminished and repressed but not illiminated, it would seem. There is something within us which, in the Psalmists words, "thirsts for the living God."

To worship is to assert that there is more to reality than what comes at one through the senses: there is an "other", a transcendent, a holy. And it is to assert further that the holy is not an abstraction, but a "Thou": a being with whom human beings have to do. Worship, very simply, is the celebration of those two assertions.

In the Presbyterian family that exercise intends to engage your heart as well as your mind. Worship, we believe, must deal with the whole person: imagination as well as intellect, emotions as well as intelligence. It is simpler to design the experience to create an emotional response if you don't have to deal with people who are thinking rationally. The opposite is equally true and it is perhaps our peculiar Presbyterian distortion: worship easily becomes too cognitive, a lecture surrounded by a little music, invocation, and benediction. And so we try to engage the whole person: we try to keep a lively tension between the mystery of the transcendent and the responsibility to think intelligently about God and life and our discipleship.

What we do in worship itself is perhaps best understood as a three part dialogue between God and the church. Bear with me for a minute while I describe it.

The first word in the conversation is God's. It is the word of transcendence, the word of mystery. It is the word God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush - "I am who I am." It is spoken architecturally, and artistically, and musically by the organ and the choir. It is God's call to worship. The second word - our response - is a hymn of praise intended to lift heart and mind and body in adoration of the creator. We answer the call to worship and symbolically the choir, representing all of us, does process, symbolically - into God's presence.

And then a third word follows: our response has reminded us of something. Our hymn of praise and prayer of adoration have reminded us that there is a gap between our creator and ourselves. The gap is not only our humanity. In God's light we can suddenly see it as sin. So we confess. We confess as church and we confess as individuals, and that fact sometimes makes some people uncomfortable, but it's consistent and, I would submit, it is ordinarily an appropriate exercise for all of us. Panella observes that, "The liturgical encounter with the pure holiness of God can fulfill and transform only if it first judges." (op. cit., p. 992)

God answers: it is the privilege of the leader in worship to say it: "Friends, believe the good news" and as if it is too good to be said by one voice, we all say it - "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." That, we believe, is the voice of the Lord. On our behalf, the choir answers, a response, a liturgical "thank you" for the gift we have just been given.

And then we take a breath. The first part of the conversation is over. The organ covers over our shifting in our seats, getting ready for the second part of the dialogue. Part of that little interlude is a greeting and some announcements and then we listen for God's word. In children's message, Old and New Testament, anthem, and sermon, we believe that God addresses his people. We have incorporated a collect, a very ancient Christian custom, a "little" prayer which is ordinarily related to the readings for the day.

The third part of the conversation is the time for our response. We have celebrated God's existence. We have listened for his word. Now we answer. In hymn and creed, we give verbal response. In prayers we answer his word of love. And in offering, the high point of the entire exercise, we respond to God's love and grace and demand by giving tangibly of ourselves and symbolically recommitting our lives to God's kingdom. As we rise and present our offering, we are answering his word of love.

The blessing or benediction is God's word to us. And now our response will be lived out in the world until we gather again.

That is how worship is intended in our tradition. The reality obviously often falls somewhat short. Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard defined the problem one hundred years ago in a way which is still relevant. Most people, he said, go to worship in the same frame of mind as they attend the theater. They go in order to have something done to them: they expect to be entertained, stimulated, comforted, made to laugh or cry. They go to church, that is to say, as an audience. The clergy and choir are the performers. God, everyone hopes, will serve as prompter. The theatre analogy is a good one, Kierkegaard maintained. The parts are wrong. In true worship God is the audience, the clergy and choir are the prompters, the actors are the congregation who have come in order to do worship.

Donald Macleod, professor at Princeton Seminary, used to say that the major heresy in American Christianity was contained in the statement often heard after church: "I didn't get anything out of it." The second major heresy, I would submit, is the oft repeated protest, "But I don't need to go to church to worship." Worship, by definition, is a corporate act: it takes a congregation to worship, but rather than argue semantics I would gladly confess that I, for one, need to go to worship. I can't do it alone. I need the church to help me believe. I need to help me affirm and confess and pray. I need the structure and the disciplines because my mind wanders if I try to think about God for a few minutes. More to the point, however, Presbyterians have always resisted the idea that God exists for our private edification or that moments of religious revelation are given to us for our entertainment. We believe that God speaks to us in order to elicit our answer, our response. We believe the individual's response to God is always to be part of the community, the people of God. Moses, as we will see on a subsequent Sunday, wasn't given the burning bush experience for his private viewing pleasure, but to call him back to Egypt to lead the people out of bondage and into the promised land.

The genius of worship which is well planned and understood and done with care is that it allows us to express something which is nearly inexpressible, something none of us is capable of expressing alone. There is something in worship akin to a comment the Russian dancer, Pavlova made one time. She was asked, "What were you trying to say in that number?" She replied, "You think I would have danced if I could have said it?" (Ernest Campbell's Notebook, Winter 1982)

We can't always say what we feel or even what we know. We are not always able to say our response to a Beethoven Symphony, or a sunset, or a heroic rally in a tennis tournament, or an expression of love from our beloved. And so we applaud, or sing, or sometimes weep in silent gratitude. Worship enables us to express from out of our own depths the faith and love and hope for which words are simply not adequate.

"As his custom was", Jesus went to Synagogue on the Sabbath. We need to worship. For the sake of our own humanity and wholeness we need to be in touch with the reality represented by words like the holy, the transcendent, God.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote lines once which have always defined for me what should happen and can happen in worship - I commend them to you.

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes -
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."
(Aurora Leigh, Book VII, Line 820)